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SUBJECT: FEARS OF AL-SHABAAB TIES PROMPT ROYG REVIEW OF
POLICY ON SOMALI REFUGEES

REF: A. SANAA 2116
[1](#)B. SANAA 1851

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. The ROYG's recent call for universal registration of all refugees in Yemen has raised fears among African refugees, particularly of Somali origin, that they will be deported due to the ROYG's suspicions of Al-Shabaab support to terrorist elements and to the Houthi rebels in Sa'ada. The ROYG has declared that all refugees must register within two months or risk deportation and has reportedly stepped up patrols and roadblocks outside refugee centers known to host large numbers of Somalis. This crackdown comes on the heels of Somali militant terrorist group Al-Shabaab's pledged support for the Houthi rebels in northern Yemen and for Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Aid workers report that refugees have been detained, interrogated, and deported based on nothing more than unsubstantiated claims of terrorist or Houthi affiliation. Meanwhile, migration and aid experts believe the ROYG's call for all refugees to register within two months is unrealistic and points to hidden motives. Some of these officials suggest that the call for registration could be a first step towards expelling refugees, especially those of Somali descent, based on dubious claims of terrorist affiliation, while the ROYG's true motivations may lie somewhere in between concerns on the security front and a desire to diminish what is viewed as a costly economic burden. END SUMMARY.

THE AL-SHABAAB SCARE

[1](#)2. (C) The Ministry of Interior announced on January 18 that all refugees must register within the next two months or else they will be deported. Such a move represents a departure from the ROYG's previous policy of granting all Somali migrants prima facie refugee status. Somalia's extremist terrorist organization Al-Shabaab, which is carrying out an armed rebellion against Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG), has voiced support for al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Houthi rebels in northern Yemen. Yemen's Al-Watan Online, an Arabic publication known to support ROYG views, published a report declaring that Al-Shabaab's connection to AQAP and the Houthis prompted the ROYG to take "urgent precautionary measures to initiate a comprehensive record of African refugees and infiltrators into Yemen."

13. (C) Anecdotally, surveys of Somali refugees conducted by the International Organization of Migration (IOM) have turned up a few Somalis who admitted to traveling to Yemen to seek training with AQAP, but it is not clear whether or not they were members of Al-Shabaab or simply acting on their own. Stefano Tamagnini, IOM's Chief of Mission for Yemen, told PolOff on January 26 that the vast majority of Somali refugees are simply trying to escape a dangerous situation in their homeland and are in search of employment opportunities in Yemen and beyond in the Gulf. While Tamagnini affirmed the value of a registration process for refugees, he warned of potential ROYG over-reaction to rumors of terrorist elements among the refugee population. "The ROYG has other motives for registering refugees...they are reacting to the Shabaab scare."

14. (S/NF) Reporting through sensitive channels suggests there may have been some communication between Al-Shabaab and AQAP leadership in early January, but there is still no hard evidence of an Al-Shabaab presence in Yemen. Additionally, there has been no solid evidence of Somali fighters in Sa'ada alongside the Houthis as the ROYG has claimed. (NOTE: ROYG officials have claimed that "Somali fighters" collaborating with the Houthis have been found dead in Sa'ada, without presenting any evidence in support of its claim. It is more likely that any Somalis that may have been found in the Sa'ada area were en route to Saudi Arabia and simply following the major migration path for refugees seeking jobs in the Gulf. END NOTE.) Ayman Nasser, editor of independent, Aden-based Al-Tariq newspaper, told PolOff on February 2 that one of his field reporters had received

unconfirmed reports that a few recruiters had approached Somali refugees with light arms experience near the Kharaz camp on behalf of Al-Shabaab.

"WRONG PLACE, WRONG TIME"

15. (C) Leila Nasser of the UNHCR office in Aden, where most African refugees in Yemen are processed, told EmbOff that the majority of Somalis and migrants from other Horn of Africa nations are seeking safety and economic opportunities. Those stopped and detained by ROYG security forces looking for possible terrorists or those suspected of having Houthi connections "were just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

According to Nasser, African refugees automatically come under suspicion, especially if they are picked up in the northern regions of Yemen, even though they are actually trying to get to Saudi Arabia or other Gulf countries where there are more lucrative employment options. Yemen's Political Security Organization (PSO) can take any refugee they suspect of terrorist or Houthi ties from the camps without evidence. Only one refugee has been taken from the Kharaz UNHCR camp for suspected terrorist ties that Nasser knows of, but she said, "in the north, the numbers of refugees taken to prison for alleged terrorist ties are much higher."

16. (C) Post and PRM have noted concerns regarding refugee access to the camps and third-party monitor access to detained refugees. An unknown number of refugees are never documented and are taken into ROYG security custody before they ever reach one of the refugee centers, often intercepted along the coast or in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea before or right after they land. (NOTE: PolOff witnessed large numbers of prisoners of African origin being held in a Central Security prison in Hodeida in November. When asked, the prison warden admitted they were all pre-trial prisoners being held without any formal charges except that of illegal immigration. The prisoners, among them Somalis who are entitled to prima facie refugee status, had not been granted access to their embassies due to the belief that "they are all cooperating with the Houthis in Sa'ada." END NOTE.)

A NUMBERS GAME

17. (C) Extrapolating from recent years' rates of registration of Somali refugees, some estimates suggest that Yemen is currently home to 600,000 to 700,000 Somali refugees (by far the largest component of the refugee population), in addition to refugees from a number of other African nations including Eritrea and Ethiopia and, in lesser numbers, Kenya and Djibouti. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 77,800 new arrivals travelled from the Horn of Africa to its registration centers in the south in 2009, which represents a 55 percent increase from the 50,200 that arrived in 2008. (NOTE: UNHCR is legally bound to report only those arrivals from Somalia that have passed through its registration centers and have been granted official refugee status, but it acknowledges that the influx is much larger than what is captured by official statistics. END NOTE.) Samer Haddedin, UNHCR Refugee Coordinator, told PolOff on February 2 that "nobody knows how big the population really is, but we believe the government's 800,000 estimate is inflated for political purposes." The bulk of Yemen's Somali refugees arrived in steady streams since 1992, however these numbers have been increasing sharply in the last three years. According to Haddedin, "Though no one is sure, we think almost 50 percent of the migrant and refugee population arrived in the last two years."

SOMALIS UNDER EXTRA SCRUTINY

18. (U) Shabeele Media Network, an independent online publication based in Mogadishu, reported on January 23 that Somali refugees in Yemen have been subject to more scrutiny following Al-Shabaab's threat to send fighters to take up arms against the ROYG. According to Shabeele, Somali

refugees have been banned from traveling from camp to camp or from residing outside one of the refugee camps, and ROYG security forces have established roadblocks outside of the Qaras Refugee camp where more than 25,000 Somali refugees reside. Haddedin told PolOff on February 2 that he had heard reports of Somalis being subjected to "extra hardships and discrimination, and the government is limiting the movement of the Somalis. If a Somali is found without a registration document, the security forces can arrest them." Al-Watan Online also reported that the ROYG has tightened its security measures along the coasts and other locations because "terrorists and saboteurs have been recruiting Somali refugees in the Ras al-Arah area of Lahj and trafficking them to some areas of Sa'ada." President Saleh, in an interview with Abu Dhabi TV on January 12, lamented the fact that Al-Shabaab's statement of support to AQAP would require ROYG security forces to alter their stance regarding Somali refugees. Saleh warned that "the Somalis should be cautious and track the infiltrators in their villages and camps and immediately report them to the security forces, so that they (the rest of the Somali refugee population) would not experience any form of harassment by the security forces."

THE SOMALI SCAPEGOAT

19. (C) Oakley Duff, President of Odyssey Migration Control and head of IOM's recent assessment of Yemen's border security and migration policies, told PolOff on January 26 that, "all the officials I have met with recently have a new mantra, 'Security is our number one priority.'" Calling the new deadline for refugee registration "completely unrealistic," Tamagnini questions how the ROYG would accomplish a thorough and fair registration of refugees in the timeframe they have indicated, especially considering the ROYG's lack of a viable plan and the Somalis' fear of wrongful imprisonment. "The vast majority of refugees, particularly Somalis, will refuse to register because they will fear that they'll be thrown into jail or deported." An estimated 95 percent of Yemen's refugees are from Somalia. Haddedin told PolOff on February 2 that "the government is

thinking of changing the legal status of the Somali refugees, so that no new arrivals could claim prima facie refugee status." In addition to security concerns, ROYG officials have repeatedly voiced other reasons to reject Somali immigrants, including a belief that Somalis are bringing disease, crime, and greater unemployment to Yemen (REF B). Colonel Lotf A. H. Al-Baraty, the General Director of the Yemen Coast Guard's Aden district, told PolOff that "Somalis are the source of huge economic costs on Aden and bring disease and begging to our streets." (NOTE: UNHCR and aid donations cover the bulk of the financial costs associated with hosting Somali refugees in Yemen, and disease rates among refugee populations in the camps are actually lower than among the general Yemeni populace. END NOTE.)

COMMENT

110. (S/NF) While Al-Shabaab may have issued statements of support to AQAP, the lack of evidence of an Al-Shabaab presence in Yemen suggests that its support to AQAP remains largely ideological and rhetorical rather than logistical at this point. The vast majority of Somali refugees in Yemen pose no terrorist threat to the ROYG, though the perceived economic burden they represent for a central government that has difficulty providing basic services to its own citizens has created resentment, social segregation, and discrimination among the Yemeni populace. Furthermore, the lack of a viable plan to register all refugees within the two months the ROYG has allotted suggests that this measure could provide a pretext for deportations of Yemen's large Somali refugee population. END COMMENT.
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